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AUTHOR Hawkins, Darnell F.; Laub, John H.; Lauritsen, Janet L.; Cothern, Lynn

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ABSTRACT

This Bulletin describes the racial distribution of serious and violent offending among juveniles in the United States. It provides a picture of the short-term national trends for offending patterns by race and ethnicity and summarizes research findings on racial and ethnic differences in chronic juvenile offending. Various explanations are given for the racial and ethnic differences observed. The Bulletin includes recommendations for improving public understanding of these differences and implications for guiding prevention and intervention efforts. Data are from state records generated by criminal and juvenile justice authorities and self-report data from delinquency and victimization surveys. The magnitude of the differences under which different groups live suggests that the individual-level correlation between race and serious and violent juvenile offending is a function of ecological conditions. This supports the idea that the association of race and juvenile violence is primarily a function of community context. (Contains 57 references.) (SLD)

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OJJDP
John J. Wilson, Acting Administrator
June 2000
JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Race, Ethnicity, and Serious and Violent Juvenile Offending

Darnell F. Hawkins, John H. Laub, Janet L. Lauritsen, and Lynn Cothern

Researchers have long observed differences in rates of serious juvenile and adult offending among ethnic and racial groups in the United States. These differences have prompted competing theoretical interpretations and public policy debates. However, conclusions about the racial differences in serious and violent juvenile offending have been reached primarily using individual-level data that, when used alone, yield incomplete results. Multilevel analyses that consider community and contextual factors have the potential to produce a fuller understanding of the meaning of these differences.

This Bulletin first describes the racial distribution of serious and violent offending among juveniles in the United States. It provides a picture of the short-term national trends for offending patterns by race and ethnicity and summarizes research findings on racial and ethnic differences in chronic juvenile offending. Various explanations are given for the racial and ethnic differences observed. The Bulletin includes recommendations for improving understanding of these differences and implications for guiding prevention and intervention efforts.

Sources of Data

Data on serious and violent juvenile offending are primarily of two types: official data from records generated by criminal and juvenile justice agencies and self-report data produced by delinquency and victimization surveys conducted independently of these criminal and juvenile justice agencies. Each source has strengths and weaknesses in the study of racial and ethnic differences in rates of serious offending.

Official Data

Traditionally, arrest data have been used to study differences in rates of offending. The primary weakness of arrest data is that the data are collected only for those criminal and delinquent events that come to the attention of the police and result in an arrest. If ethnic and racial groups differ in their inclination to report crime to the authorities, or if crimes committed by certain groups are more likely to result in an arrest, these factors can bias estimates of racial differences in offending rates. Police themselves may be biased in their arrest policies and may handle offenders differently (e.g., arresting rather than warning) depending on the offender's racial or ethnic background (Hagan and Peterson, 1995; Mann, 1993).

From the Administrator

If we are to successfully address the issue of minority overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system, it is critical to understand the interrelationships among race, ethnicity, and serious and violent juvenile offending and their policy implications.

The data sources that could lead to such understanding, however, evidence deficiencies. The most commonly used data, official crime statistics, are limited by the fact that they represent solely those law-violating activities that result in arrest. The primary limitation of self-report offending data is the small sample size typical of such surveys.

This Bulletin details the strengths and weaknesses of these data sources and describes the findings of alternative data sources, including OJJDP's Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency.

Although researchers have long been aware of racial and ethnic differences in serious and violent juvenile offending, interpreting these variances has been problematic. The Bulletin, however, offers several explanations derived from the research literature.

I hope that the information this Bulletin provides will help reframe the research and policy agenda in a manner that strengthens the juvenile justice system and improves the safety and welfare of all Americans.

John J. Wilson
Acting Administrator

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Race and Ethnicity

The data discussed in this Bulletin rely on race and ethnicity categories defined by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Race is defined as one of five categories—white; black; American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut; Asian or Pacific Islander; or other. The term "black" includes African Americans and people of this racial designation whose ancestral origin lies outside the United States (e.g., Haitians). Ethnicity usually indicates a person's country or countries of origin. In most data collections, however, this is limited to the designation Hispanic, which is based on people's identification of themselves as persons of Spanish-speaking origin, although they may be members of any one of the above race groups. This Bulletin focuses on racial rather than ethnic comparisons, because the data contrasting Hispanics and non-Hispanics are limited and lack the consistency needed for comparisons. Similar problems affect the collection of crime data for other racial groups such as Asians and Native Americans.

Other limitations include the fact that official crime statistics are incident based rather than person based. In other words, these data do not provide information about the chronicity of individual offending or the length of time the offender has been involved in crime. Also, while race-specific arrest rates can be calculated from official crime statistics, reliable comparisons of differences within racial groups (e.g., Caribbean blacks versus native U.S. blacks) cannot be drawn because such information is not recorded consistently in police data. Nevertheless, arrest statistics are often used to measure the level of juvenile involvement in crime.

Despite these limitations, several researchers have shown that data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) can be used reliably to assess differences in rates of serious offending (Hindelang, 1978; Gove, Hughes, and Geerken, 1985; Sampson and Lauritsen, 1997). In crimes such as robbery and assault, the distribution of arrestees by race has been compared with victims' reports of the perceived race of the offender in order to estimate the extent to which arrest data might misrepresent involvement in offending. These comparisons suggest that much of the race difference in arrests for violence is due to greater involvement in offending on the part of blacks. In cases of homicide, where victim reports are impossible, arrest data also are believed to accurately reflect race differences in offending because arrests are typically made on the basis of physical evidence and witness reports. It is important to note that most violent crime is intraracial and that blacks are disproportionately the victims of homicide and other forms of violence (Sampson and Lauritsen, 1997). But because it is impossible to compare victim reports to arrest data for the majority of crimes in which the victim does not see the offender, conclusions about race differences for other types of offending are difficult to make. Thus, the overall evidence suggests that UCR data in general should be used cautiously and, when possible, should be supplemented with data from other sources.

Self-Report Offending Data

Self-report surveys provide a useful alternative source of data because they eliminate some of the weaknesses inherent in official records. These surveys collect data directly from juveniles who report to researchers about their own conduct, even conduct not detected by authorities. The data provide another view of the overall distribution of crime and delinquency.

The disadvantage of self-report surveys in the study of serious and violent offending is that the sample size is typically too small to generate enough information about serious and violent offenders to assess racial and ethnic differences reliably (Cernkovich, Giordano, and Pugh, 1985). Another disadvantage is that there may be a difference in the validity of self-reports for blacks and whites (Hindelang, 1981; Huizinga and Elliott, 1986). Early studies found that blacks were more likely to underreport serious misconduct, but a more recent study found no racial differences in predictive validity based on these self-reports (Farrington et al., 1996). In addition, with few exceptions, these early studies were based on local rather than national population samples.

Self-Report Victimization Data

The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), another alternative to UCR data, is an ongoing survey conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics that measures the extent of personal and household victimization in the United States. The NCVS provides data about the characteristics of offenders as perceived by victims, regardless of whether the victim reported the crime to the police. Like other data sources, NCVS data have limitations in making racial and ethnic comparisons. As a survey of victims, no data on homicide are provided, no data are collected on the victimization experiences of persons under the age of 12, and victims can only identify an offender's race or ethnicity in crimes involving personal contact. Also, victims of crimes committed by family members or nonstrangers underreport victimization to interviewers. Other limitations include the fact that victims' reports of offender attributes can be difficult to corroborate and that reports of crimes involving multiple offenders do not identify the characteristics of each offender (Laub, 1987).

In summary, the exclusive use of any one source of data can produce an underestimate of the volume of violent crime. None of these sources alone provides sufficient information about the characteristics of offenders and victims and the nature of the violence committed. Data on the social contexts of violence are especially lacking in the UCR and NCVS (Loftin and Mercy, 1995). However, these sources of data can be used in tandem to develop reliable estimates of racial and ethnic differences in serious juvenile offending.

Serious and Violent Offending, by Race and Ethnicity

Official Data[1]

Data from the 1998 UCR indicate that differential rates of arrest for crime are related to race (see Snyder, 1999). Arrests of white juveniles (under age 18) constituted 71 percent of all juvenile arrests compared with 26 percent for black youth. American Indian or Alaska Native and Asian or Pacific Islanders account for 1 and 2 percent, respectively (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999). Black youth were overrepresented, given the fact that they make up 15 percent of the juvenile population compared with 79 percent white and 5 percent other races. The distribution by index crime type varies, however. Black youth accounted for 42 percent of arrests for violent crime

[1] These data have been updated from the data found in Hawkins, Laub, and Lauritsen, 1998, on which this Bulletin is based.

compared with 55 percent for white youth (3 percent were youth of other races). Black youth, when compared with white youth, were most overrepresented in arrests for robbery (54 percent and 43 percent, respectively) and murder and non-negligent manslaughter (49 percent and 47 percent, respectively). Black youth were least disproportionately involved in arson arrests (18 percent and 80 percent, respectively) (Snyder, 1999; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999).

Juvenile involvement in crime by race has been generally consistent over the past several decades (LaFree, 1995). However, the racial gap in rates of homicide widened dramatically between 1986 and 1994. Black youth were responsible for the majority of the increase in homicides by juveniles in these years "and for the majority of the decline thereafter" (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999).

If all serious crime is considered, a more complex picture emerges. Between 1983 and 1992, the juvenile arrest rates for all types of violent crimes increased 82 percent among white youth and 43 percent among black youth (Snyder and Sickmund, 1995). The pattern of change was greatest for robbery and homicide arrest rates. In 1983, black youth were approximately five times more likely to be arrested for homicide than were white youth; in 1992, that ratio was more than seven to one.

What is the meaning of these race-specific trends in violence? Blumstein (1995) attributed the growth of youth homicide to illicit drug markets into which youth had been recruited. Juveniles working in these markets armed themselves, and so the use of guns was "diffused" to other teenagers in the community. The notion of gun diffusion is supported by the concomitant increase in the homicide rate among black juveniles from 1986 to 1994 but has not been supported by other research (Howell, 1997).

More comparative research is needed to understand racial and ethnic differences in rates of offending. In this area of research, a number of case studies were conducted in several U.S. cities in the 1980's among youth of Hispanic ancestry. Between 1980 and 1985, homicide arrest rates for 10- to 17-year-old Hispanics in New York City were more than twice those of whites (Rodriguez, 1988). In southern California, the homicide death rate for 15- to 24-year-old Latino males during 1980 was more than four times the rate for white Anglo males (Valdez, Nourjah, and Nourjah, 1988). At the same time in Chicago, Latino males between ages 15 and 19 were homicide victims 4½ times more often than non-Latino white males (Block, 1988). These findings suggest the importance of taking ethnicity into consideration when examining youth violence data.

Another factor to consider when interpreting racial and ethnic differences is the length of time and degree to which youth are involved in serious crime. UCR data are not helpful in this regard. However, a few longitudinal studies have shed some light on this issue using official data. Relying on police data from a 1945 Philadelphia cohort, Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin (1972) found that race and socioeconomic status were related to the frequency and seriousness of offenses. These findings were confirmed using the 1958 Philadelphia cohort (Tracy, Wolfgang, and Figlio, 1985). However, more data are needed to fully understand the relationship between race and chronic offending.

Alternative Data Sources

Self-report studies using broader measures of delinquency, such as the National Youth Survey (NYS), show inconclusive patterns of racial differences in the rates of delinquency for blacks and whites. Two studies using NYS data showed that serious and violent juvenile offenders were disproportionately black males. However, one study showed that black males were more likely to report involvement in more serious crimes (Elliott and Ageton, 1980), whereas the other found no statistically significant differences in the rates of reporting violent offending by race (Elliott, Huizinga, and Morse, 1986).

Elliott (1994) found that, at the peak age of offending (17 years), 36 percent of black males and 25 percent of white males reported that they had committed one or more serious violent offenses, a differential that is far less than that found in studies using official records (Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin, 1972). Elliott (1994) also found that nearly twice as many blacks as whites continued violent offending into early adulthood, a difference borne out in the official data. Elliott argues that even though racial differences are small, race becomes especially salient in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In a tight labor market, young blacks have been more likely to have fewer economic opportunities and become dependent on gang crime and other illegal economies for income.

Data from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP's) Program of Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency add to this picture of serious offending. In Denver, CO, Hispanics had lower prevalence rates for street crimes than African Americans but higher rates than whites (Huizinga, Loeber, and Thornberry, 1994). In Denver, Pittsburgh, PA, and Rochester, NY, whites committed fewer street crimes than other racial groups.

Analyses of racial differences in victimization survey data show patterns that are generally consistent with those of official records. Laub (1987) found that the ratio of reported juvenile offenses for rape, robbery, assault, and personal larceny committed by blacks to those committed by whites was 4.5 to 1. More recent NCVS data reveal that victims of personal crime (e.g., rape, personal robbery, aggravated assault) reported that 51 percent of juvenile offenders were white and 41 percent were black (Snyder and Sickmund, 1995). Blacks, as offenders, are overrepresented in NCVS data relative to their proportion in the general population (as in official arrest data and self-report data).

Explaining Racial and Ethnic Differences

Researchers and criminologists have long been aware of racial and ethnic differences in serious juvenile offending. Interpreting these disparities, however, is another matter; no one theory has adequately addressed the reasons for them (Hawkins, 1993, 1995). Criminologists have not paid enough attention to the extent to which socioeconomic disparity accounts for differences in rates of violence (Hawkins, 1999; Reiss and Roth, 1993), even though they have tended to attribute high rates of crime to economic disadvantages (Tonry, 1995).

These omissions are in part due to reliance on individual-level data to identify those persons most likely to offend. However, individual-centered research is unlikely to improve understanding of the group differences discussed in this Bulletin. It does not take into consideration the larger sociostructural characteristics that distinguish groups and individuals. For example, the developmental life courses of blacks and whites in the United States are affected by their membership in historically distinct social and economic groups. Community-level research can be used to study this larger context and offer great potential in interpreting the meaning of racial and ethnic differences in offending.

The community-level approach asks what it is about community structures and community cultures that produces differential rates of crime across similar and different populations, rather than asking which attributes of individuals and groups lead to criminal involvement. The work of early researchers Shaw and McKay is insightful in this regard (Sampson and Lauritsen, 1994, 1997; Sampson and Wilson, 1995; Hawkins, 1995). Shaw and McKay (1969) found that:

- High rates of delinquency persisted in certain urban areas regardless of ethnic population composition.
- Rates of delinquency within racial or ethnic subgroups varied across urban communities.
- Rates of delinquency did not increase in areas with less crime as ethnic subgroups migrated to such communities.

These findings led Shaw and McKay to focus on the transmission of delinquent behavior through social disorganization and weak social controls rather than individual or group cultural differences.

To examine variation in serious and violent juvenile crime based on these factors, Sampson (1987) disaggregated the 1980 rates of homicide and robbery by race, poverty, family disruption, joblessness, and other factors. The analysis showed that black male joblessness predicted variation in rates of black family disruption, which was significantly related to rates of black murder and robbery, particularly by juveniles. Sampson concluded that this analysis reveals why joblessness and poverty have had weak or inconsistent direct effects on violence rates in past research. These factors in fact exert influence on family disruption, which in turn, directly affects juvenile violence rates.

The percentage of white and black female-headed families was significantly related to white and black violence, although a higher level of family disruption was observed among blacks. In other words, both black and white juvenile violence rates are affected by the same sociostructural factors. The causes of violence appear to be similarly rooted in structural differences across communities and cities, regardless of race. Because of this, it is essential to compare the community contexts within which black and white youth are raised, and to do this, multilevel studies across all racial and ethnic groups are needed.

Blacks often live in communities very different from those of whites (Massey, 1996; Sampson and Wilson, 1995; Wilson et al., 1988). For example, family disruption characterizes the communities in which poor blacks live; relative family stability characterizes those of poor whites. Thus, the interaction between individual traits and neighborhood characteristics must be studied, not just differential rates of crime. In addition, increased urbanization, inequality, and class segregation have had a disproportionate impact on blacks in the past 30 years (Massey, 1996). In 1970, one in five poor blacks lived in high-poverty areas; by 1990, the ratio was slightly more than two out of five (Kasarda, 1993).

The magnitude of the differences under which different groups live suggests that the individual-level correlation between race and serious and violent juvenile offending is a function of ecological conditions. Peeples and Loeber (1994) found that, by controlling for community context (the juvenile's residential neighborhood), racial and ethnic differences in delinquency disappeared. This supports the idea that the association of race and juvenile violence is primarily a function of community context.

These findings also highlight the fact that researchers have not paid enough attention to within-group differences (Hawkins, 1983, 1999), such as those between communities of poor and middle-class blacks. One study that did make such a comparison found that firearm death rates from 1979 to 1989 for black youth 15 to 19 years old varied from 143.9 per 100,000 youth in core areas of large cities to 48.2 in small metropolitan areas, and to 15.5 in nonmetropolitan locations (Fingerhut, Ingram, and Feldman, 1992). Within-group differences may be as large and important to assess as the differences between groups.

Reframing the Research and Policy Agenda

Multilevel research designs and theories that reflect a variety of analytic methods can further the study of serious and violent juvenile crime, especially when attempting to identify and account for ethnic and racial differences. The insights gained from such research have policy-related implications. Public policy aimed at reducing serious and violent juvenile offending should adopt the goal of transforming urban communities, especially in light of past trends in the concentration of urban poverty.

This approach requires that theories of community social organization be linked with theories of political economy. Researchers should examine the dynamics between the sociostructural characteristics of urban neighborhoods and the community's ability to regulate the behavior of its residents in the context of larger social and political processes. This approach suggests that changes in black communities, such as increased poverty and disorganization in the late 1970's and 1980's, may have affected family functioning, which in turn has contributed to more recent increases in juvenile delinquency. Recent urban violence may thus be partly attributable to childhood socialization processes in place at that time.

New research should take into consideration a number of other factors. Exposure to violence may also contribute to the involvement in serious crime of youth in disadvantaged communities. Intergenerational violence may lead to psychosocial stress and higher rates of victimization and offending (see Maxfield and Widom, 1996). More generally, victimization and offending have been shown to have reciprocal influences on one another (see Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub, 1991).

Situational factors such as alcohol and drug use, drug trafficking, or use of weapons may contribute to some of the racial and ethnic differences in serious crime rates (Clarke, 1983; Gabor, 1986; Harries, 1990; Monahan and Klassen, 1982). Individual-level and community-level theories alone cannot account for situational factors. Miethe and Meier (1994) and others have suggested that most theories and research designs do not account for the situational interplay between victims and offenders, which may be essential in the study of adolescent offending. Addressing situational factors also can contribute to the development of prevention and intervention protocols.

Multilevel research would benefit from research methods that are used less today, such as ethnography (Anderson, 1994; Jankowski, 1995; and Sullivan, 1989), an analysis of culture that can be used to identify and analyze the situational links between inequality and crime. When combined with arrest or self-report data, ethnographic methods can be valuable in understanding group differences in crime and violence rates.

The effects of gender also need to be considered when explaining differences in rates of serious and violent offending. Harris (1996), for example, used a survey research design to assess the attitudes and aggressive behaviors of males and females. In her sample of Anglo, Hispanic, and African American respondents, she found that aggressive behavior was influenced by individual, contextual, and cultural variables and sometimes by the interaction between ethnicity and gender.

Finally, researchers need to use more diverse samples of offenders and victims. Even though official records and choices of research sites give researchers reason to focus on the differences between blacks and whites, the United States has become increasingly diverse. An examination of the relatively high rates of violence among some groups of Native Americans and Latinos and the relatively low rates of violence among some groups of Asian Americans could help in the development of policies aimed at reducing violence among African Americans.

The size of nonwhite racial groups in the United States and the ethnic mix within them have increased. Many people of Latin American, Middle Eastern, and Asian ancestry have immigrated to the United States over the past two decades. In some cities, population changes may have already altered the ethnic-racial profile of serious and violent offenders, many of whom have been found to be involved in youth groupings and gangs of Eastern European, Asian, Latin American (other than Mexican), and Caribbean (other than Puerto Rican) ancestry. Researchers need to disaggregate data from national sources and use multilevel quantitative and qualitative data to draw the fine-tuned comparisons called for in this Bulletin.

OJJDP Study Group on Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders

In 1995, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) convened a Study Group on Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders (Study Group), a distinguished panel brought together to build a research base for policymakers and practitioners who deal with juveniles who engage in serious and violent conduct. The group, chaired by Drs. Rolf Loeber and David P. Farrington, included 22 leading juvenile justice and criminology scholars selected on the basis of their expert knowledge of different aspects of serious and violent juvenile (SVJ) offenders. The OJJDP Study Group documented existing information about SVJ offenders, examined programs for SVJ offenders, evaluated the programs' performance, and recommended further research and evaluation efforts needed to prevent and control SVJ offending.

The Study Group's final report, *Never Too Early, Never Too Late: Risk Factors and Successful Interventions for Serious and Violent Offenders*, was completed in 1997 under grant number 95–JD–FX–0018. The conclusions of the Study Group were subsequently set forth in a volume entitled *Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders: Risk Factors and Successful Interventions*, edited by the Study Group's cochairs, Rolf Loeber and David P. Farrington, and published by Sage Publications, Inc., in 1998. Chapter 3 of the book, "Race, Ethnicity, and Serious Offending" (by Darnell F. Hawkins, John H. Laub, and Janet L. Lauritsen), is the subject of this Bulletin.

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For Further Information

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- **Summaries of the OJJDP Study Group's Final Report.** To help communities and practitioners learn more about serious and violent juvenile offenders, OJJDP has released a series of Bulletins available from JJC that summarize the Study Group's final report (this Bulletin is part of this series):
  - *Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders* (May 1998).
  - *School and Community Interventions To Prevent Serious and Violent Offending* (October 1999).
  - *Prevention of Serious and Violent Juvenile Offending* (April 2000).
  - *Effective Intervention for Serious Juvenile Offending* (April 2000).
  - *Predictors of Youth Violence* (April 2000).
- **Final Study Group Report.** The Study Group's final report, *Never Too Early, Never Too Late: Risk Factors and Successful Interventions for Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders* (Loeber and Farrington, 1997), is also available (for a fee) from JJC.

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Acknowledgments

Darnell F. Hawkins, Ph.D., is Professor of African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago; John H. Laub, Ph.D., is Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Maryland, College Park; Janet L. Lauritsen, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri-St. Louis; and Lynn Cothern, Ph.D., is Senior Writer-Editor for the Juvenile Justice Resource Center in Rockville, MD.

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